



January/February 2019

Xplor

CATCH A
WHIFF OF MISSOURI'S
MOST AROMATIC
ANIMAL



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6 Fabulously Funky

Striped skunks won't raise a stink — unless it's absolutely necessary.

12 Seven Wins for Wildlife

These Missouri critters have won the fight for survival.

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You've heard of the chicken dance, but have you ever seen a *chicken dance*? In early spring, male greater prairie-chickens stamp their feet and dance to attract mates. Once common, these funky chickens have nearly disappeared from Missouri. To learn about animals that we've brought back from the brink, turn to Page 12.

📷 by Noppadol Paothong





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ON THE COVER

Striped Skunk
by Noppadol Paothong

GET OUT!

FUN THINGS TO DO
AND GREAT PLACES
TO DISCOVER NATURE

LOOK FOR MOURNING
CLOAK AND
COMMA
BUTTERFLIES

on warm days.



Mourning cloak

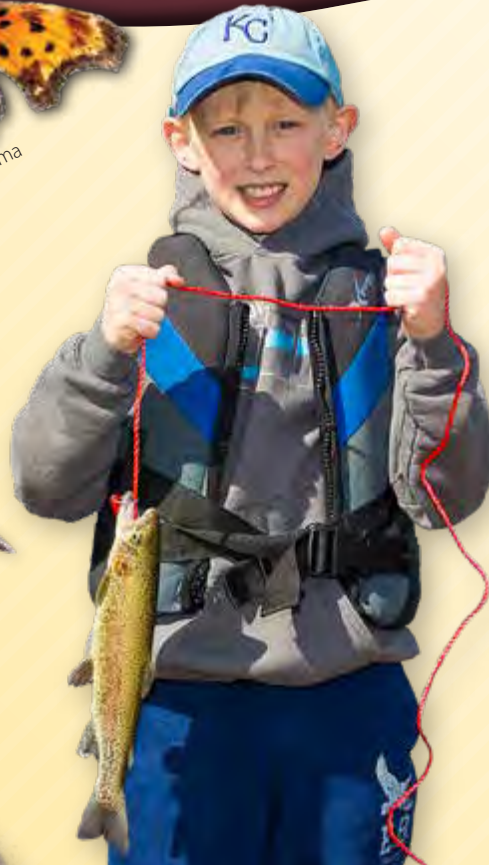


Comma



CELEBRATE
GROUNDHOG DAY
FEBRUARY 2.

If the furry
forecaster sees his
shadow, it's six more
weeks of winter, but
if he doesn't, spring
is on its way!



LISTEN FOR
CHICKADEES

calling as they feed on
insects in bark crevices.



Carolina chickadee

Black-capped
chickadee

TAKE A GROWN-UP FISHING.

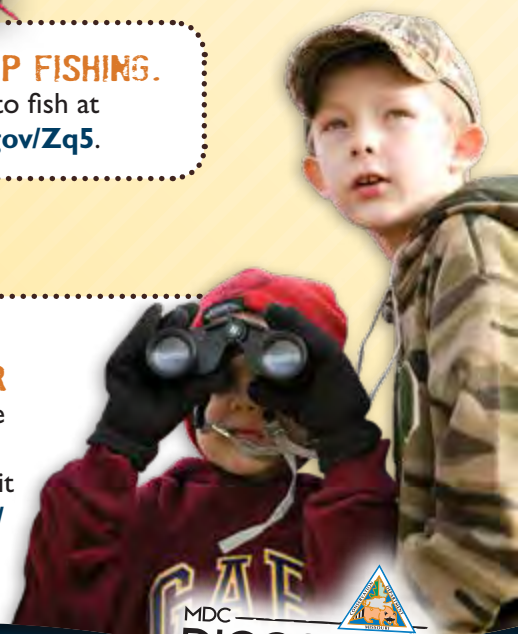
Find great places to fish at
short.mdc.mo.gov/Zq5.

WATCH
FOR
RIVER
OTTERS
playing on
the ice.



VISIT AN MDC
NATURE CENTER

to hike trails, explore
exhibits, and enjoy
nature programs. Visit
[short.mdc.mo.gov/
Zpg](http://short.mdc.mo.gov/Zpg) to find a nature
center near you.



WHAT IS?

DON'T KNOW?

Jump to the back cover to find out.



- ① Like a tiger, I hunt in the night.
- ② In the day, I stay hidden from sight.

- ③ During fall rains, I join others like me ...
- ④ ... in a pond to begin a new family.



Into the WILD snowy forest

The woods in winter may seem silent and still, but there's plenty of life to be found if you know where to look.



LOOK

Scan leafless branches for the papery nests of bald-faced hornets. In summer, each nest may contain 400 hornets. But don't worry. Only a few queens survive during winter.

Did You Know?

During cold weather, flying squirrels snuggle together in hollow trees. Their furry bodies can warm the den by 30 degrees, and the more squirrels there are, the toastier it gets. Fifty squirrels have been found packed into a single tree!



Take a Closer Look

If you find an artist conk fungus growing on a tree, use a stick to scratch the mushroom's snow-white underside. Like magic, wherever you scratch will turn dark.

LOOK

Ozark witch-hazel is among the first plants to bloom in Missouri. The shrubby trees unfurl frilly, flashy flowers in mid-January — sometimes when snow still blankets the ground.



What Happened Here?

This opossum isn't dead. It's just pretending. If predators approach, these furry fakers often faint, slobber, and release stinky fluid from their rear ends. Yuck! When this happens, most predators lose their appetites.

Listen

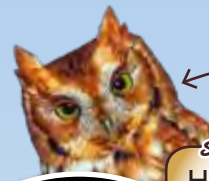
In winter, owls call to attract a mate. Here's how to tell hoo's looking for love.

Barred owl

Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?

Great horned owl

Hoo, HOO, hoo-hoo.



Eastern screech-owl
High-pitched, horselike whinny



Take a Closer Look

Look carefully inside tree cavities and along branches, and you might find a screech-owl taking a nap. The camouflage pattern on its feathers makes the little owl all but invisible against a barky background.

Downy woodpecker

Red-headed woodpecker

Pileated woodpecker

LOOK

When you're surrounded by woods, you're bound to find woodpeckers. The head-banging birds are easy to locate by their harsh calls and their rat-a-tat tapping on trees. Here are five common woodpeckers to watch for.

Hairy woodpecker

Red-bellied woodpecker

Did You Know?

Although they're one of Missouri's mightiest mammals, black bears give birth to itty-bitty babies. Born in February while mama bear's asleep in her winter den, newborn cubs are about 15 times smaller than human babies.



Fabulously Funky

by
Matt
Seek

The young coyote was hungry — and dumb. It had cornered a cat-sized animal against a fallen log. The animal looked fat and delicious. Yet something about it wasn't quite right. This was usually the point in the coyote's attack when prey made a last-ditch attempt to flee. But the little black creature was standing its ground.

Eventually, hunger overpowered the coyote's wariness. With a yip, the wild dog bared its fangs and leapt forward ... directly into a yellowish-green cloud of stink. Suddenly, the predator couldn't be a predator anymore. Its eyes burned. Its nose stung. And the smell — *hooooowl* — the smell was unbearable.

As the coyote ground its head into the dirt, trying in vain to rub the stench from its fur, the little black creature waddled away. It had just taught Missouri's craftiest predator a lesson it would never forget: Messing with a skunk is a stink you don't want to raise.





White on Black Means "Stay Back!"

If you were to examine a striped skunk — upwind, from a distance, and wearing a gas mask, of course — you might notice its short legs, its small head, or its bushy tail. But more likely the first thing you'd spot was its black-and-white fur. The bold stripes act like a warning sign to other animals. They're how a skunk yells "BACK OFF!" without making a sound.

Skunks aren't built to avoid predators. For one, they're terribly near-sighted. A predator could creep within 10 feet of a skunk before it ever took notice. And skunks aren't speed demons. When pressed, the chubby mammal might waddle off at 8 mph — about as fast as a toddler on a wobbly walk.

But why hurry and why worry? After all, nature has equipped skunks with a superpower that makes them nearly predator proof.

Reluctant Warriors

Some skunks — particularly youngsters — are trigger-happy and will let their funk fly at the slightest sign of danger. Most, however, will go to great lengths to warn attackers before unleashing the nuclear option.

If a threat approaches, a skunk often flares out the hairs on its tail like a scared cat. It might stamp its front paws rapidly on the ground, *pat-a-pat-a-pat!* It may click its teeth, growl, or hiss. Or it may flip into a handstand and walk around with its tail pointed skyward. This would be adorable except for what usually happens next ...

Fighting the Funk

If your dog — or your little brother — happens to get sprayed, you have two options. 1. Make them stay outside (preferably downwind) for the next three weeks. 2. Fight chemistry with chemistry. Mix together 1 quart of 3 percent hydrogen peroxide, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of baking soda, and a tablespoon of dish soap. Lather the concoction into Fido's fur (or your little brother's hair) and let it sit a bit. The mixture will react with the stinky chemicals in the skunk spray and turn them into harmless, odorless molecules that you can rinse away. Whatever you do, don't soak the victim in tomato juice. It won't quell the smell. It will just make them smell like skunky spaghetti sauce.

Stink Bomb

If a predator won't back down, the skunk bends its body into a U shape, so that both its head and its dangerous derrière are pointed toward the attacker. Two fleshy nozzles push out from below the skunk's tail. Like squirt guns, the nozzles shoot out stinky musk. The spray is so powerful, your nose can detect one molecule of the foul-smelling fluid in a billion molecules of air. In fact, you can catch the whiff of a skunk's back blast from more than a mile away!

When a skunk is being chased, it can drop a fog of foulness that its chaser must run through. When cornered, a skunk can squirt a stream of stink directly at a predator's pie hole. In calm weather, the musky mammals can bull's-eye a target from 10 feet away and get close enough to make a victim hate life from a distance of 20 feet. Even worse, a skunk can fire five or six times before running out of ammo.

Home Sweet Hole

Striped skunks are found throughout Missouri. Although they prefer to live on the edge, in spaces where two kinds of habitats come together, the adaptable animals can be found nearly anywhere, even urban backyards.

During the day, skunks usually sleep in an underground den. Sometimes a skunk digs its own skunk hole, but usually it uses the abandoned burrow of another mammal, such as a woodchuck or fox. Skunks carry leaves inside their dens to build comfy, cozy beds.

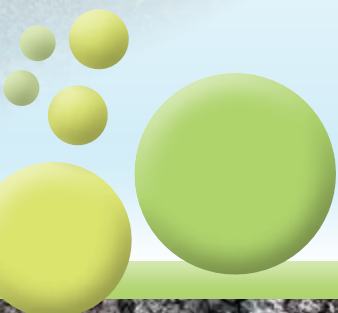




Furry Vacuum Cleaners

Wherever they roam, skunks act like furry vacuum cleaners that Hoover up anything they come across. This includes fruits, grains, worms, moles, shrews, baby bunnies, eggs — even garbage and dead animals. But their favorite foods are creatures that most people consider to be pests: insects and rodents.

Their love of food can get them in trouble. Skunks sometimes leave lawns pockmarked with holes from digging up creepy-crawlies to eat. If pet food is left outside, a skunk will happily gobble up the free meal and defend it — with stinky effect — from its rightful owner. And skunks have been known to tear into trash bags like they were sacks of Halloween candy.



Missouri's Other Skunk

Though striped skunks are far more common, Missouri is home to another flavor of skunk: the eastern spotted skunk. Smaller than their striped cousins, spotted skunks scamper rather than waddle and are agile enough to climb trees. In most of the U.S., spotted skunks prefer open prairies and brushy fields. But in Missouri, they're most likely to be found in Ozark woodlands.

Spotted skunks were once common in the Show-Me State, but in the 1940s they all but disappeared. Today, spotted skunks are rare. If you're lucky enough to spot one, please call your local Conservation Department office to report where you saw it.

Shuggle Buddies

In autumn, skunks pack on pounds. The fat helps them survive winter weather.

When temperatures drop, the chubby eating machines retire to their dens for winter naps that can last for weeks. During this time, several skunks may gather in the same den for warmth. They even join other animals, such as woodchucks, opossums, and rabbits. As many as 20 skunks have been found snuggled together in a single den.

Spring Speed Bumps

The most likely month to catch a whiff of skunk funk is March. This is when skunks wake from their long winter naps hungry for food — and for love. Mate-crazed males wander widely to find females, and many of the near-sighted Romeos get pancaked when they cross highways.

Little Stinkers

Although their boyfriends leave after just a few days, girl skunks aren't lonely for long. By May, females are busy turning their dens into nurseries. There, they give birth to a litter of four to eight babies.

At birth, the kitten-sized kits are blind, toothless, and nearly hairless, but their skin shows the iconic black-and-white markings. After two weeks of drinking mom's milk, the kits are fully furred. A few days later, their eyes squint open. And a month after that, mom takes her little stinkers — now armed and dangerous — out for their first nighttime hunts.

The family stays together until fall. Then, the youngsters strike out to be fabulously funky on their own.



© Geoffrey Kuchera | Dreamstime.com

SEVEN WINS FOR

Wildlife

Do you say, “Wow!” when you spot a whitetail? Deer are fun to watch. But many years ago, people had taken almost all of Missouri’s deer to eat and to sell.

Today, thanks to the Missouri Department of Conservation (aka MDC) and people just like you, there are lots of deer and other kinds of critters in our state.

Let’s take a look at seven kinds of wildlife that have made a strong comeback.

These Missouri critters have won the fight for survival

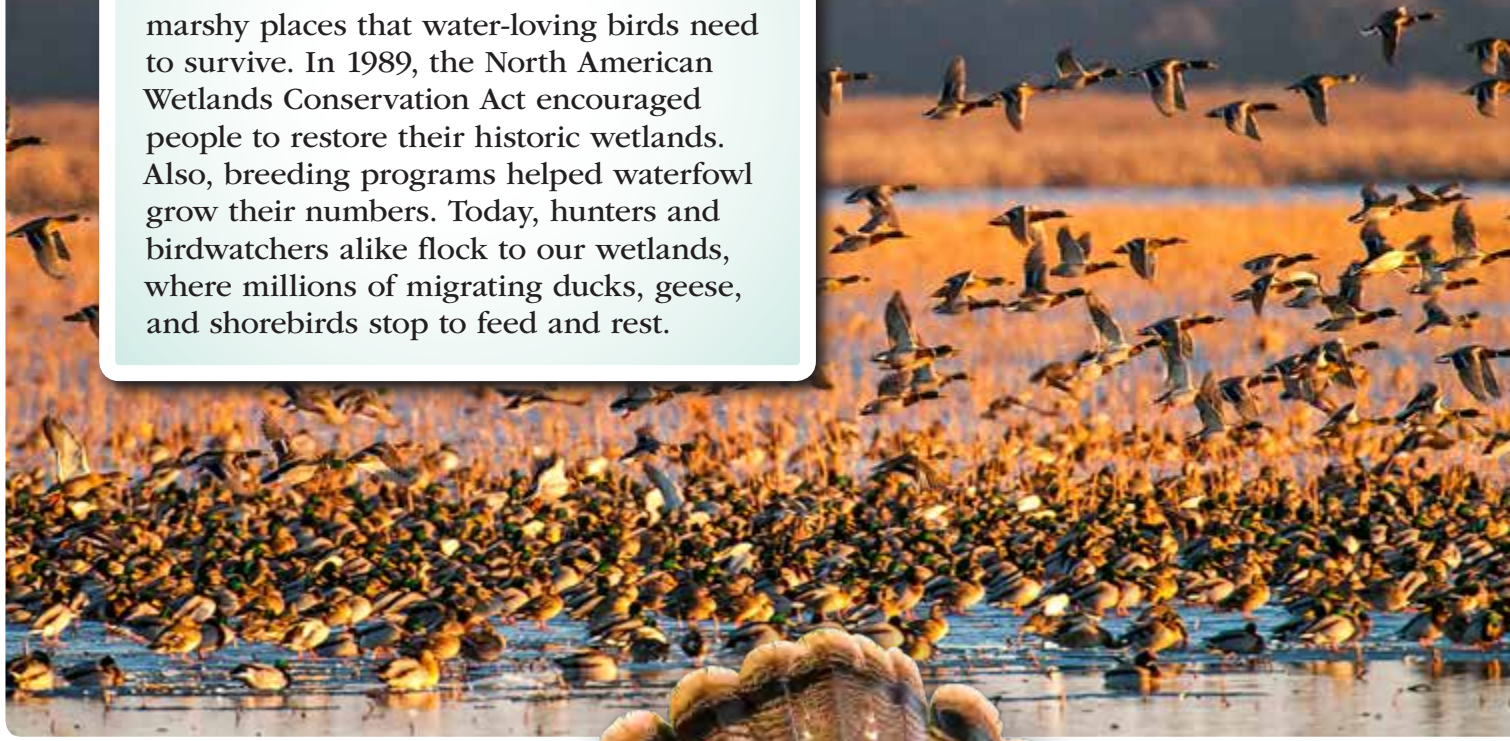
by Bonnie Chasteen

WHITE-TAILED DEER

There are more than a million whitetails in Missouri. But back in 1925, only about 400 remained in the whole state. To protect these few survivors, MDC made it illegal to hunt them. Conservation agents also brought in deer from other states. By 1944, the herd had grown to 15,000. MDC reopened the hunting season, this time with strong rules. When you see a white-tailed deer, remember that it was once nearly as rare in Missouri as a unicorn.

DUCKS, GEESE, AND OTHER WATERFOWL

When you hear geese honking overhead, you know spring or fall is on its way. But Missouri nearly lost the sounds of migrating geese. One reason was the widespread loss of our continent's wetlands. These are marshy places that water-loving birds need to survive. In 1989, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act encouraged people to restore their historic wetlands. Also, breeding programs helped waterfowl grow their numbers. Today, hunters and birdwatchers alike flock to our wetlands, where millions of migrating ducks, geese, and shorebirds stop to feed and rest.



WILD TURKEY

When settlers came to Missouri, they didn't even bother raising turkeys for the dinner table — wild ones were so plentiful! But by the early 1950s, people had gobbled up all but about 2,500 of Missouri's wild turkeys. To bring them back, MDC bought a large area in the Ozarks, where a few turkeys still strutted. Turkeys were trapped there and released throughout the state. Today, you can expect to see wild turkeys in all of Missouri's counties, maybe even in your yard!



Boy turkeys perform fancy displays for girl turkeys. They spread their tails like a peacock and puff out their feathers. Bug-hungry baby turkeys leave the nest soon after hatching.



PEREGRINE FALCON

Missouri's fastest flyer disappeared from Missouri in the mid-1900s.

Pesticides had poisoned its food and weakened its eggs.

With a chemical ban and artificial nest boxes in place, falconers and biologists helped return falcons to Missouri and other places where they had disappeared. Now, you can see peregrines raise their young on two Missouri web cameras. Watch them at short.mdc.mo.gov/ZZJ.

During its breath-taking dive from heights of over half a mile, the peregrine can reach speeds of 200 mph as it drops toward its prey.



BABY PEREGRINE



ELK

Elk like to communicate. In the fall, boy elk "bugle" to warn rivals and attract mates. Elk even emit a knuckle-cracking sound with their front legs to signal others when a herd is moving through dense woods.

These big browsers once roamed throughout most of North America. But by the late 1800s, Missouri's elk had disappeared into people's stewpots. In 2011, MDC began bringing in elk from Kentucky. Today, the Missouri elk herd is about 170 animals strong and growing every year. If you visit Peck Ranch Conservation Area in Carter and Shannon counties, you might see and hear them for yourself.

BALD EAGLE

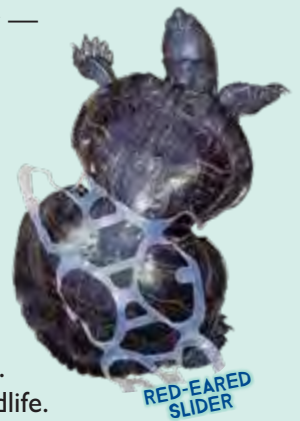
Did you know America adopted the bald eagle as its national symbol in 1782? Sadly, this big bird of prey wasn't strong enough to survive habitat loss and pesticides. These chemicals poisoned their food and weakened their eggs, making it nearly impossible for healthy chicks to hatch. By 1963, with only 487 nesting pairs of bald eagles left, the United States listed the bird as endangered. Protected from harm and with breeding programs and restored wetlands, the bald eagle slowly recovered. Now, you regularly see them soaring along Missouri's waterways, especially in winter.



HELPING HABITAT HELPS Wildlife

Wildlife needs habitat — the right kind of space, shelter, food, and water — to feel safe and secure. You can't expect to see all Missouri's wild critters where you live. But you can help your local wildlife keep winning the fight for survival.

- ✓ Don't litter and help clean up trash, especially when you hike or float. Litter hurts wildlife.



RED-EARED SLIDER

- ✓ Don't dump your bait or unwanted aquarium pets. Releasing nonnative fish, frogs, and other critters into the water can hurt Missouri's native animals.

- ✓ Make room for wildlife in your yard. Birds and butterflies need native flowers, shrubs, and trees. Frogs, toads, and turtles like a little wild area with some water, if possible. Bunnies will use an out-of-the-way brush pile, and squirrels need nut-bearing trees like oaks, hickories, walnuts, and pecans.



MONARCH + MILKWEED

BLACK BEAR

Unless you live in the Ozarks, you probably haven't seen many bears in Missouri. But they were once fairly common across the state. Settlers hunted them for their meat, fat, and hides. By the early 1900s, black bears disappeared from Missouri. Over the last 40 years, however, black bears have reappeared in Missouri's Ozarks. Researchers think a small group may have survived there all along and are tracking the bear's reappearance. They're also helping everyone get used to the idea of having bears in our state again.



THE STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE ISN'T ALWAYS A FAIR FIGHT

THIS
ISSUE:

GREAT HORNED OWL VS. WILD TURKEY

Illustrated by David Besenger

Strong and Silent

Powerful wings with specially formed feathers carry the owl almost silently overhead.

Focused and Forceful

Keen night vision helps the owl spot its prey. Powerful talons are ready to clamp shut on contact.

Bigger and Bulkier

The turkey hen weighs about 10 pounds — two times as much as the owl.

AND THE WINNER IS...

Even though the turkey hen is bigger and heavier, it's no match for the owl's silent wings and killer talons. The owl wins.

STRANGE but TRUE!

YOUR GUIDE TO ALL THE
UNUSUAL, UNIQUE,
AND **UNBELIEVABLE** STUFF
THAT GOES ON IN NATURE

A **NORTHERN CARDINAL** can sing a duet all by itself. Your voice box can make only one sound at a time. But many birds have a two-tubed syrinx (seer-inks) that can produce two sounds at once.



Fishmas trees: Many people, including Conservation Department biologists, sink their **CHRISTMAS TREES** — minus the ornaments and tinsel, of course — into lakes and ponds. The dense branches provide hiding places for fish and other aquatic creatures.



Shakespeare featured birds in many of his plays and poems. On a cold winter's day in 1890, a Shakespeare fan released 60 **EUROPEAN STARLINGS** into New York City. Today, more than 200 million starlings live across the United States.



WHITE-TAILED DEER wear different gear throughout the year. In summer, deer have a lightweight coat of reddish-tan fur. When the weather turns colder, deer grow a shaggier coat that looks grayish-brown.



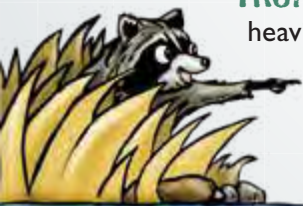
In frigid winter weather, **STRIPED SKUNKS** curl up for power naps that can last several weeks. During these super-sized slumbers, the chubby mammals burn fat like marathon runners. Female skunks, in particular, may drop 40 percent of their weight.



Barely bigger than a soda can, the **NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL** is Missouri's smallest bird of prey. Larger owls, such as barred owls, often swallow mice in a single gulp, but dainty saw-whets usually require two meals to polish off a rodent.



TRUMPETER SWANS aren't featherweights. Missouri's heaviest bird often tips the scales at more than 26 pounds. To get their feathered fannies airborne, swans must gallop over 100 yards across the water's surface, flapping their wings furiously.



100 yards



HOW TO

Feed the Birds

Putting up a bird feeder — or several — when it's cold and snowy offers a win-win. Birds get treats, and you get tweets.

Follow these 10 tips to keep your beak-tipped buddies well-fed all winter long.

Downy woodpecker

White-breasted nuthatch

#1

Stock up on sunflower seeds.

What should you serve at your bird buffet? Black-oil sunflower seeds attract the widest variety of birds. Northern cardinals especially love 'em.

#2

Keep it clean.

You wouldn't want to eat off of a dirty plate, and the feathered foragers in your yard don't want to either. Keep your feeders clean by washing them in soapy water every two weeks. Let them dry completely before filling them with seeds.

#3 Offer fatty foods, too.

Suet cakes or peanut butter mixed with cornmeal provides a high-energy snack for woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees.

#4 Remember water.

Like all animals, birds need water to survive. A pan of water will wet a thirsty bird's whistle if the weather's warm. When it's cold, a heated birdbath is best.

#5 Put up more than one feeder.

Sometimes one bird will hog all the food at a feeder. (We're looking at you, blue jay.) To share the love with the rest of the flock, put up an extra feeder or two.

#6 Hang feeders near windows.

It sounds silly, but placing feeders within 3 feet of a window is the best way to keep birds from crashing into it. Why? Birds are more likely to notice the glass, and even if they don't, they aren't likely to be flying fast when they take off and land at the feeder.

#7 Keep your feeders full.

If you forget to fill your feeder, don't sweat it. Birds will find food elsewhere. But to keep your feathered friends coming back, keep the food a-coming.

#8 Keep cats inside.

Who doesn't love cute little kitties? Birds, that's who! Biologists estimate that house cats kill nearly a billion birds in the U.S. each year. So keep Fluffy indoors. It's safer for her and for the birds.

#9 Baffle squirrels.

Bushy-tailed bandits can gobble seed by the bushel. Discourage squirrels by putting baffles — wide, saucer-shaped pieces of plastic — above and below your feeders. A trash can lid makes an inexpensive yet effective baffle.

#10 Offer shelter.

When possible, place your feeders near trees and shrubs — but not too close. Birds need cover to escape from predators and to take shelter from wind and rain. But bushes also offer hiding places for cats and other bird munchers. Hanging feeders 10 feet away gives birds the best chance.



Northern cardinal

XPLOR MOR

Cavity Creatures

Biologists call a dead tree that's still standing a snag. All kinds of animals call it home. Use the snags at right to answer the questions below.

Questions

- 1 Which two snags have exactly the same kinds of animals living in them? _____
- 2 Which snag has the most animals living in it? _____
- 3 Which snag has the fewest animals living in it? _____
- 4 Which snag has the most mammals? _____
- 5 How many rodents can you find? (Hint: Squirrels, chipmunks, and mice are all rodents.) _____
- 6 How many flying animals can you find? _____
- 7 How many seed-eating animals can you find? (Hint: Squirrels, chipmunks, mice, woodpeckers, and chickadees all eat lots of seeds.) _____
- 8 Which snag contains the most owls? _____
- 9 How many nocturnal animals (animals that come out at night) live in the snags? (Hint: Raccoons, opossums, mice, and owls are nocturnal.) _____
- 10 How many diurnal animals (animals that come out during the day) live in the snags? _____





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WHAT IS IT?

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Eastern Tiger Salamander



Unless you're out at night after a heavy rain, you probably won't see the eastern tiger salamander. Active only at night, it feeds on snails, slugs, and bugs. During fall rains, it migrates to fishless ponds to breed. In late February, courtship begins. Each female may lay up to 1,000 eggs, and gilled larvae hatch a few weeks later. They live in the water until late summer, when they transform into land-dwellers. Learn more at mdc.mo.gov/field-guide.